

Séminaire *ERIBIA* 2014-2015  
*Mémoire, transmission et création*

9 avril 14-18 heures : Séminaire double  
MRSH, salle des Thèses

14 heures : Robert Grant (University of Glasgow)  
*Modernism, Memory and Yeats's Byzantium* \*

Modératrice : Alexandra SLABY

There are two wings of Modernism, one Romantic, *symboliste*, subjective; the other classicizing, formalist, objective. Like Byzantine art for T.E. Hulme and Ortega y Gasset, Yeats's two Byzantium poems superficially commend a heavily stylized aesthetic abstraction, as opposed to the human, the spontaneous and the vital. Such Modernist anti-humanism was partly a reaction against Romantic and Victorian sentimentality. But there was also a confusion of sentimentality with humane sympathy, a fear of the formless and unpredictable, and, in T.S. Eliot, a loathing of the flesh.

Eliot's alternative to the flesh was 'la forme précise de Byzance'. Ernst Jünger, a Modernist decorated in both World Wars, foresaw a future of mechanized warfare, in which sympathetic emotion would be a liability. Man's only salvation lay in stoical indifference, viz. in cultivating an emotional carapace.

The carapace metaphor is a Modernist topos, whence the recurrent image of the insect or crustacean. We are soft outside, but vertebrates. Insects, however, wear their skeletons externally, as armour, while (to us) their internal parts are a soft, formless mess. Kafka's Gregor Samsa wakes up to find himself inhabiting the inverse of a human body. Eliot's Prufrock fantasizes about being a crab, an automated bundle of reflexes, and thus impervious to humiliation. The tank (a Great War invention) is a giant insect, its inner, vulnerable parts being the human crew.

Modern people seem to crave mechanical organization (cf. totalitarianism) to rescue them from existential formlessness. In D.H. Lawrence's critique the industrial classes actually enjoy submitting to the machine. Waugh's Professor Silenus opines that 'man is only happy when he becomes the channel for the distribution of mechanical forces'. The speaker in 'Sailing to Byzantium' aspires, fantastically, to be a mechanical songbird.

The reduction of the human to the mechanical stems from a longing to escape from the complexities of living, and especially, in Yeats, from the tormenting memories of vanished youth. In the Byzantium poems, in contrast to other Yeats poems of the same period, his speaker appears to celebrate this lofty hieratic aestheticism, transcending both memory and personality. But the underlying critique of it in the Byzantium poems only reinforces Yeats's search, in 'Among School Children' and elsewhere, for what he called Unity of Being, where 'the body is not bruised to pleasure soul'.

Robert Grant is emeritus professor of the history of ideas the University of Glasgow. His publications include *Oakeshott* (Claridge Press Thinkers of Our Time series, London 1990), *The Politics of Sex and Other Essays* (Macmillan, Basingstoke 2000), *Imagining the Real: Essays on Politics, Literature and Ideology* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2003).

\* Conférence en anglais

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